

503 Bureau of agricultural economics  
A POSSIBLE APPROACH TO LAND USE PLANNING  
AND FARM MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS  
BY TEACHERS OF VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE

JUL 16 1940

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Address by Rex E. Willard, Regional Representative, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Berkeley, California, before the Twenty-Second Annual Conference of Executive Officers, State Directors, State Supervisors and Teacher Trainers in Agriculture, Home Economics, Trade and Industrial, and Business Education, Pacific Region, Olympic Hotel, Seattle, Washington. May 9, 1940.

In the past twenty-five years there has been a pretty radical change in the agricultural picture in this country. The last war, with its overproduction of crops and overexpansion of farm land, caused fundamental changes in the American farmer's world. To meet them he has had to make a good many changes himself. As one example, up until the last war his main job was simply to produce as much as he could on the theory that other things being equal, the more he raised the more money he made. But, as you all know, that doesn't always follow any more; the farmer has to take into account the factor of unbalanced production in relation to consumption. Rapid technological advance has caused other dislocations.

Now it is pretty obvious that if the farmer has found it desirable to take a fresh look at his problems, and at his economic and social relationships with his community and his country at large, any boy in school who hopes to be a farmer, and is studying and working to be a farmer, should know something about these new conditions also. Difficult as this may be, he at least has the advantage of not having to "unlearn" a great deal. Nor do I mean to imply that everything is different for the farmer, but only that he has to make certain changes to keep pace with the times.

Such things as national unbalance of production in relation to markets, technological improvements on farms, industrial depression, and so forth, may not seem at first glance to have much to do with a high school boy who is conducting a hog enterprise. But all of these things vitally affect farming conditions in the country as a whole, and therefore each community and each farmer. That being so, as a future farmer he will some day run up against them, and my point is that some advance knowledge will give him a much better start as a farmer.

That, as you will have suspected, brings us to the role of the instructor of vocational agriculture in all of this. Let me say flatly right at the start that what I believe necessary in our agricultural courses today is that the instructors not only be expert in the techniques of teaching agriculture, but also thoroughly versed in an understanding of the problems of agriculture and land use so that they may



develop subject matter that can be used in the schools. That's a pretty large order, I admit--and I myself certainly don't lay any claim to much knowledge of the techniques of teaching.

Let us consider, in the light of their effect on the high school student of agriculture, a few of these problems that have come up in the past generation. I say "come up" because while some of them are new, others have always existed and have simply become more apparent. After bringing them out in the light we can give a little thought to whether some new approaches may be made to these new problems. Let's take two very important ones for a start.

First, how is it possible to equip a boy at a fairly early age so that he may make a wise decision as to whether he wishes to become a farmer or to follow some other occupation? This, as you can see, involves a pretty thorough understanding of the agricultural and economic picture of our time. Perhaps for that reason we had better tackle first my second question, which is:

How can the high school graduate who wants to go into farming these days best go about the job of wisely selecting a farm on which he expects to live and raise a family? Putting it another way: What should he learn in four years of vocational agriculture that will best help him to this end?

Before becoming more specific about this problem it should be said that experience has pretty well demonstrated that the participation of adult farmers in group consideration of problems with which they are directly concerned, and the actual doing of many activities together, are feasible. Furthermore, it is perhaps the best and quickest method of accomplishing desirable economic and social adjustments in the community, the county, the State, and the Nation. It is possible that somewhat similar methods are desirable in teaching agriculture. Then, too, it would seem logical to assume that if the high school student is to be assisted so that in the future he can better compete in making a living for himself and his family, he should first examine all the tools that are in his own tool chest--his neighborhood.

Perhaps this idea can be developed more clearly if instead of thinking about it from the point of view of a number of boys in a given community, we simply assume one boy, what problems he faces, what his instructor might be able to do to help him solve them, and what he himself in association with other boys might be able to do. Let's call this boy Billy Jones.

When Billy was fifteen years old he entered the vocational agricultural high school at Centertown. As his parents had just moved onto a farm seven miles out of town he was not well acquainted with the other boys in the school, and knew little of his own neighborhood. The Jones' farm contained sixty acres, only ten of which were in cultivation. The house was not very large and not much for looks.

Billy's father paid \$200 down for the place, and contracted to pay \$1,600 more in 10 equal payments, including interest at six percent. He had a Ford, two horses, a cow, a few farm implements, a strong back, a willingness to work, and a wife and three children of whom Billy was the oldest. The real estate man told him that he could easily get outside work on neighboring farms, at the mill, or elsewhere to earn the money necessary to keep up his payments. In the meantime, he and his family could get additional acres into production on his farm.

It all sounded pretty plausible to Billy's father when he made the deal, but somehow the work didn't materialize, farm and living expenses were heavier than he thought--and, to cut a sad and all too common story short, Billy's father lost his farm before Billy finished high school.

Well, Billy's father didn't make a go of it, but our interest now is in Billy. What can vocational agriculture do for him to give him a better chance than his father had?

For one thing, it can give him a better knowledge of the Centertown area and its farming conditions than his father had, for had his father possessed this knowledge he wouldn't have bought a farm which failed despite all the hard work he put in on it. Furthermore, Billy can learn the techniques of making a pretty good estimate of farm conditions in any neighborhood. Let's start with this idea of having a thorough knowledge of the community in which you are going to farm, anyway, and see if by acquiring it, Billy wouldn't be better off. Let's assume further that the best way for Billy--and all the other Billy's in the class, incidentally--to get this information is to find the answers to a list of appropriate questions, and to find these answers themselves.

There is a twofold advantage in using this question approach. The obvious one, of course, is that of acquiring information, but it goes a little deeper than this. For, if the students really understand the questions, and their purpose, they are undergoing a learning process by that very fact. This idea might be more fully developed by having the students themselves make up, or at least add to, the list of questions.

Some of the more important questions on the list might be these:

What kind of farming is most successful here?

How large should a farm be to support a family adequately?

What is the price of land? Is the productive value equal to the price?

How much land on the farm can be cultivated?



If there is land available on the farm that could be brought under cultivation, how much will it cost and how much time will it take to improve it?

Is the water supply on the farm sufficient for domestic use or can it be obtained? Is irrigation water available?

Are the land and buildings "run down"?

Is soil erosion injuring the land? If so, can it be prevented at reasonable cost?

Is it likely that a "good living" can be made in this community? Are most farms in the community successful, or are there many "poor" farms?

Is the community new and on the up grade, or is it going "down hill"?

Are there many families in the community who are on relief or are receiving some form of public support? Why is this?

of These and a hundred other such questions may be raised by a group/boys. Answers to them are not so hard to obtain but that a group of boys can get them with a little guidance. Billy Jones' father should have had the information they would have furnished before he paid his \$200 to the real estate man, and any boy should have some such information before he seriously considers buying a farm.

Since I have said that the answers to such questions can be obtained by a group of boys, I should give my suggestions on the best way to go about it. However, I had better restrict myself to just one of them here or my time is likely to run out. I'll take the first one on the list I gave--and certainly it is an important enough one. That question, you will recall, was: What kind of farming is most successful here? The "here", of course, meaning the community in which the boys who will try to answer this question are located.

Assuming the boys wanted to get the answer to this, they could organize a series of detailed questions bearing on the subject. Each student could get his father to answer these questions, and, later, each might get the same information from neighbors. A series of questions such as the following might be used:

A SCHEDULE OF QUESTIONS

Name of farmer \_\_\_\_\_ Farm number \_\_\_\_\_

How many acres are there in your farm? \_\_\_\_\_

How many acres were in crops that were mostly sold directly for cash  
last year? \_\_\_\_\_

What were the acreages of each last year?

Name of crop	Acreage
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

How many acres were in tillable pasture? \_\_\_\_\_

How many acres were in "wild" pasture? \_\_\_\_\_

How many cows were milked during most of last year? \_\_\_\_\_

How many head of cattle were sold for beef last year? \_\_\_\_\_

How many hogs were raised last year? \_\_\_\_\_

How many laying hens were kept last year? \_\_\_\_\_

How many ewes were kept last year? \_\_\_\_\_

Which of the cash crops have been increased generally during the past  
5 or 10 years? \_\_\_\_\_

Which have been decreased? \_\_\_\_\_

Which have been about the same? \_\_\_\_\_

What kinds of livestock have increased? \_\_\_\_\_

What kinds have decreased? \_\_\_\_\_

Which have been about the same? \_\_\_\_\_

Is the house on this farm reasonably adequate and comfortable to live  
in? \_\_\_\_\_  
(yes, fair, no)

Are the other farm buildings adequate? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the general condition of the buildings? \_\_\_\_\_  
(good, fair, poor)

How long has this farm been in operation as a farm? \_\_\_\_\_



These questions are innocent enough and not one farmer in a hundred will refuse to answer them, especially if he knows that the purpose of the information is a useful one for the boys.

Now, these questions from 25 or more farms of the community may not appear very significant by themselves, so we should study the information and see if some fair conclusions may be drawn from them. Suppose the boys get a large sheet of wrapping paper (perhaps 6 x 10 feet) and rule it in a form similar to the one which I have made up for us here today. If you will take a look at them now, I'll give a brief summary of how they might be used and what conclusions may be drawn from them.

ANALYSIS SHEET

Item	Farm Number					Average		Best Combined Judgment of Boys
	1	2	3	etc		For these farms	From the last Coun- ty Census	
Acres in farm								
Acres in cash crops								
Acres, wheat								
apples								
lettuce								
etc.								
Acres tillable pasture								
Acres wild pasture								
Cows milked								
Beef sold								
Hogs raised								
Hens kept								
Ewes kept								
Crops and stock								
each								
increased /						xx		
decreased -								
same 0								
Adequacy house						xx	xx	
Condition buildings						xx	xx	
Years farm operated							xx	



Each student begins by placing the information from his schedules on this large sheet, using black crayon for the purpose. The farm number should always be used for identification and not the name of the farmer. The boys might now compute the averages for all the schedules for the appropriate items. By reference to the last agricultural census, the comparable figures for the county may be developed and entered in appropriate fashion.

In areas where farming is fairly well established, the most usual practices are frequently the best. If many farms are shifting certain operations in the same direction under the same general conditions there is generally, though not always, some sound fundamental reason for the shift. In new farming areas where agriculture is in somewhat of a flux care must be exercised in placing dependence on such shifts. The adequacy and condition of farm buildings is often a sound indication of successful or unsuccessful farming. If conditions in the county are fairly uniform, the trends between census periods frequently indicate good practices.

Many different conclusions may be drawn from these simple data and many other questions will doubtless be raised; the questions may become the basis for further inquiry and analysis. Few generalizations about farming are exactly true for any particular farm.

After much discussion by the boys, and after using other information that may be brought out, each boy might attempt an estimate of what he thinks is a desirable farm set-up for the community. The combined estimates of the group may be placed in the last column of the analysis sheet and compared with the other data. Some farms will doubtless be so far out of line with the "conclusions" as to be obviously inefficient, but if there is a considerable proportion of the farms near the average or near the census figures, the conclusions of the boys should not be far wrong.

As a scientific procedure for arriving at reliable answers, this device can be criticised. However, the experience of doing the job is the important consideration. Almost any important question in the group above outlined may be attacked by methods of this sort.

The answer to most pertinent questions is to be found right in the Centertown school district. Not only is this true, but the boys can find the answers for themselves here also with a little guidance from the instructor.

Questions thus far considered have pertained largely to individual farms. Vocational instructors and students have conducted various types of practice work dealing with agronomy, animal husbandry, soils and fertilizers, and related subjects. These may be directly associated in appropriate ways with the questions that have thus far been raised or with others. Furthermore, there are available vast amounts of subject matter, both of a textual and statistical nature,



relating to these questions in one form or another. This may be drawn upon for work in graphics where the incentives for particular practice work are drawn from a consideration of questions such as those already raised.

To illustrate: If the students' survey indicates that dairy cows are the important enterprise in a particular community, then that may arouse interest in the question of butterfat production and other dairy products, prices for cream, processing, markets, and so forth. It may also create interest in the relation of the dairy enterprise in this particular community to that of the county, of the State, and of the Nation.

Every vocational agriculture instructor has available sources of economic information from the Land Grant Colleges, from various divisions of the United States Government, such as the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Commerce, the Federal Reserve Board, and many others. It is a matter only of reasonable ingenuity for the instructors to guide the students, by means of practice work, into considerations of this kind. An outline of a course of study involving agricultural statistics and their use can probably be secured from the Department of Agricultural Economics, State College of Washington, which would doubtless be of use to instructors in developing ideas in this connection.

Now there are a number of other very important considerations going beyond the boundary of the individual farm that in these days must be taken into account. The whole question of community effort and community conditions--involving all the environmental factors--must come in for consideration.

Billy Jones ought to know how to find the answers to a large number of questions dealing with these last considerations. Among these questions might be the following:

What are the present uses to which the land of the community is put? How much is in crop, pasture, forest, range, and so forth? Exactly where are the lands now devoted to these uses? Are the lands efficiently used from the standpoint of individual farm operations? From the standpoint of sound conservation in the interest of the next generation?

Many schools have mapped present land use for the community and for the county. Farmers are engaged, through the process of county agricultural land use planning, in the same work. This information becomes associated with problems which may be represented by the following questions:

What is the relationship of the location of farm units to roads, schools, power lines, telephone lines, and similar facilities?

What are the opportunities for more efficient land use, or for changing present uses?

What does rural zoning mean?

What is the present occupation of every boy who has graduated from this agricultural high school in the last three years?

What are the available credit facilities that may be utilized by the young man and make possible his going into farming? Specifically, what does the Farm Credit Administration have to offer, or the Farm Security Administration?

What inducements are there for developing facilities useful in the more efficient operation of farms, and what handles are there that the young man may take hold of to help him in this direction?

In connection with this last question, I might add that what will largely determine the continuance or discontinuance of the newer Federal agricultural agencies--the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Soil Conservation Service, Farm Security Administration, etc., --will be the way in which they are used by the people they are intended to help. If they are useful they will continue and if not, they will be abandoned or revised.

To continue our questions:

In a particular location, is the retirement of school bonds or indebtedness for other special improvements responsible for high taxes on the land?

Are there many farms in the community that are now being rented? Are the leasing arrangements on the basis of a long-term written lease or are they on the basis of annual operation? What kind of leases are desirable in the community? Should a young man lease a farm before he attempts to become a farm owner?

What are the functions of the Board of County Commissioners with respect to the management of lands which the county may own? What are the policies with respect to the resale of land which has come into the possession of the county through tax delinquency procedures?

These and a hundred other questions in the present economic and social structure of agriculture are pertinent questions about which every farmer is concerned. So let us take one of these and see what approach might be made from the standpoint of the future farmers--the Billy Joneses--who are in the vocational agriculture classes.

"What is the present occupation of every boy who has graduated from this agricultural high school in the past three years?"



The usefulness of this knowledge may not seem great to Billy Jones at first glance, but before he gets through working on the question he will probably see how vital it is to him to know it, because the more young men there are who want to go into farming, the harder time he is going to have from the very fact of competition. If the number of such young men in the country as a whole who are in farming or looking for a farming opportunity does not mean much to Billy, it will when he and his classmates bring it down to the number of such young men among their own group.

A procedure similar to the one I have already mentioned in connection with kinds of farming which are successful might be used again here. The following schedule of questions might be developed by the students and the information obtained as I shall indicate.





From the foregoing summary, how many graduates are in each category? If a large proportion are on rented land, what does that mean with respect to Billy Jones and his prospects? If many are in other occupations, or if many are at home, or unemployed, what does that signify? Considerable study may then be given to the reasons why each is in the particular situation that he now occupies.

Such study may lead to many other questions and answers. While some of the facts may not be pleasant, I believe that the students are entitled to the facts and their significance.

In relation to the national problem of opportunity for employment, analysis might involve the question of the movement of population from the country to the city and the reverse movement, and a consideration of the birth rates and death rates in rural areas and in cities. These in turn might lead to the problem of national employment and related problems. Large amounts of data are available as the basis for consideration of these subjects.

In more than 450 counties in 35 States, instructors in vocational agriculture are participating directly in the work of agricultural land use planning committees. Home economics teachers are participating in 149 counties in 17 States. There is no reason why the young men who are in the vocational agriculture courses should not be introduced to this work. If they are to become farmers in the future, they must some day take these subjects into account, and a head start may do them much good. The systematic participation of instructors in land use planning should give them "leads" to hundreds of problems of the community which might well be considered by students in the high school.

The Chief of the Agricultural Education Service in the United States Office of Education suggests that cooperative work might be started in at least a few places to demonstrate whether or not this work with land use planning groups is a practical arrangement. He suggests further that work be undertaken in States and counties where conditions are favorable for harmonious relationships.

When work of the character above indicated is undertaken with boys from 14 to 20 years of age, obviously it must be organized in accordance with the ability and capacity of the students to handle it. Moving from the known to the unknown would seem the most logical way to approach it. One simple example of how this may be done comes to my mind from the report of a vocational agriculture instructor in the State of Washington. Speaking of his class work in wheat varieties, he wrote:

"The problem of the selection of the most profitable wheat varieties was brought up before the class. In order to determine which varieties were best, it was necessary to call on local experience and yields as well as to study experiment station bulletins and statistics. In an attempt to get more information, the class offered to conduct a wheat yield experiment plat in connection with Washington State College."

Many other illustrations of participation of students in a wide variety of subjects could be cited.

After going through schedules of questions such as those previously described, more complicated problems may be undertaken. Among these might be: Present land use mapping, which has already been mentioned; the mapping of individual farms; the development and conduct of a comprehensive farm-management survey; preparation of farm plans; and the development of area land-use plans sufficiently so that students may comprehend the significance of problems of the community.

Speaking of individual farm plans, many agencies of the Department of Agriculture and of the States, and other agencies, are assisting in this direction. For instance, the Land Grant Colleges are devoting lots of time to farm accounting and farm budgets in cooperation with farmers. Some vocational agriculture instructors are attempting work in individual farm planning. The Soil Conservation Service, Farm Security Administration, Agricultural Adjustment Administration, and the Farm Credit Administration, also are doing this type of work.

In many cases, there have been two or more farm plans for the same farm, with different agencies cooperating with the farmer. Regardless of what their objectives may be, these plans are difficult to carry out by the individual farmer if they differ widely. Therefore, it is of great importance that farm plans, each of which has its own particular objective, be inclusive enough to meet all objectives with which the farmer is concerned.

Progress in eliminating these duplications is being made.

The Land Grant Colleges, the United States Department of Agriculture, and the personnel of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics in particular, are authorized to lend every possible assistance where they can be of service in the conduct of work of this character. There is a State representative of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics in every State, and he is now actively participating in the agricultural land-use planning work above mentioned, and he may be of some assistance.

Likewise, instructors in vocational agriculture, because of their strategic position and knowledge, can be of very great assistance in the conduct of the work among adult farmers. Indeed, the work that is conducted by vocational agriculture instructors in night schools might well include consideration of types of approach, and subject matter derived by the students in each community which would be of vital interest to adults.

In closing, let me summarize with a few questions. Is it not of the greatest importance that future farmers have at hand a greater fund of knowledge concerning economic and social, as well as physical, problems of everyday life than their fathers had? In a democratic country, is it not of the utmost importance that farmers equip themselves with an adequate understanding so that they themselves can develop



their own plans and programs, both individually and together, which are of benefit to themselves and to the general welfare? Is there any quicker and more sound procedure for getting this knowledge and understanding than by participation in the development and operation of plans of action, assisted by trained technicians, such as vocational agricultural instructors? Is not the conservation of human and physical resources one of the most important problems before us today?

My answer to all these questions would be in the affirmative.

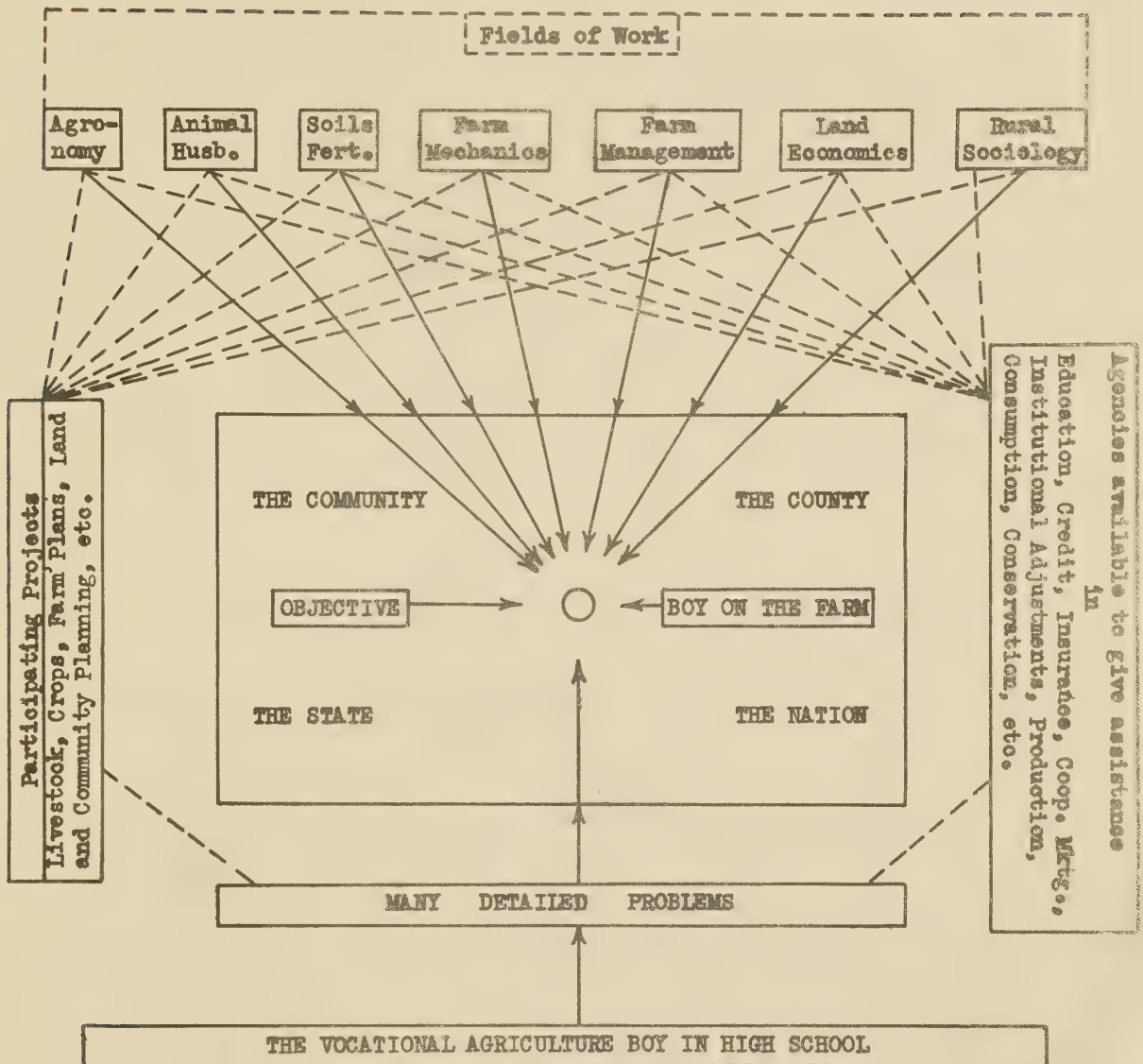
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THE BIG PROBLEM  
TO FIT BOYS TO FARMING OPPORTUNITIES



The above diagrammatic picture is intended for the use of the instructor and technician, in order that they may see the balanced whole which the boy must ultimately face. The instructor must see the entire panorama or the place of each part cannot be fitted into the composite whole. The boy may not ever place all of the technical parts in the whole scheme that is here portrayed.





## CARRYING ON

1. Make your own preparation for the discussion. Think the question through in advance. Aim to establish connections between ideas of background materials, and experience and ideas of group-members.
2. Aim at outset to get a sharply defined question before the group. Have three or four alternatives put on board if you think this will help: "Which do you want to start with?" "Is this question clear?"
3. In general, don't put questions to particular group-members, unless you see that an idea is trying to find words there anyway: "Mrs. Brown, you were about to say something." Otherwise: "Let's have some discussion of this question . . ." "What do some of the rest of you think about this?" "We've been hearing from the men. Now how do you women feel about this?" "What's been the experience of you folks up in the northern part of the State in this connection?" Etc.
4. Interrupt the "speech maker" as tactfully as possible: "While we're on this point, let's hear from some of the others. Can we save your other point till later?"
5. Keep discussion on the track; keep it always directed, but let the group lay its own track to a large extent. Don't groove it narrowly yourself. Try to limit your own part in the discussion to one statement for every three or four by group members.
6. Remember: The leader's opinion doesn't count in the discussion. Keep your own view out of it. Your job is to get the ideas of others out for an airing.
7. If you see that some important angle is being neglected, point it out: "Bill Jones was telling me last week that he thinks . . . What do you think of that?"
8. Keep the spirits high. Encourage ease, informality, good humor. Let everybody have a good time. Foster friendly disagreement. Listen with respect and appreciation to all ideas, but stress what is important, and turn discussion away from what is not.
9. Take time every 10 minutes or so to draw the loose ends together: "Let's see where we've been going." Be as fair and accurate in summary as possible. Close discussion with summary—your own or the secretary's.
10. Call attention to unanswered questions for future study or for reference back to speakers. Nourish a desire in group members for continuing study and discussion through skillful closing summary.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION LEADERS

GETTING READY

1. Arrange group in circle, so each person can see every other person.
2. Provide table space, if convenient, for leader and entire group.
3. Let all stay seated during discussion, including leader. Keep it informal.
4. Start by making everybody comfortable. Check ventilation and lighting.
5. See that everybody knows everybody else. At first gathering go 'round the circle, each introducing himself. As a newcomer joins group later, introduce yourself to him and him to the group.
6. Learn names of all as soon as you can.
7. Have blackboard, chalk, and eraser ready for use in case of need. Appoint a "blackboard secretary" if the subject-matter and occasion make it desirable.
8. Start on time, and close at prearranged time.
9. In opening, emphasize: Everyone is to take part. If one single member's view fails to get out in the open, insofar the discussion falls short.
10. Toward this, emphasize: No speeches, by leader or group member. No monopoly. After opening statement, limit individual contributions to a minute or so.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Bureau of Agricultural Economics

Division of Program Study and Discussion

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*Suggestions*  
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7. Strike while the idea is hot.

Don't wait for the leader to recognize you before speaking. If several want to speak at once, it's his job to grant the floor to one, give the others a chance later. In your ideal discussion the leader speaks only once to every three or four contributions from group members.

8. Come to the discussion with questions in mind.

Make note of questions and points of disagreement that occur to you during advance reading or listening, and raise them during the discussion. Farm papers, the daily press, lectures, public forums, the radio, etc., are good sources for clippings and notes to be used at discussion meetings.

9. Go ahead from discussion to study.

Remember that discussion is just the first step - an important one, but still just a starter. If your thinking is stirred up by the discussion here, seek out materials for further study on the problems. Ask your County Agricultural Agent, Home Demonstration Worker, or State Discussion Leader about reference materials. Call on them, too, for help in organizing a county-wide discussion movement, training leaders, etc.

10. Why not group discussion at home?

All over the country farm men and women are gathering, often in farm homes, for discussion of public problems under local leaders. Some are using the best discussion and forum programs of the air as springboards for continuing discussion. Why not a neighborhood discussion group in your home?

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION GROUP MEMBERS

1. Speak your mind freely.

The discussion meeting is yours - a chance for you to say what you think. Say it. Your ideas count. Here "everyone's idea is worth just as much as everyone else's, and a good bit more than some."

2. Listen thoughtfully to others.

Try hard to get the other man's point of view - see what experience and thinking it rests on. Remember: On almost every question there are three points of view - yours, mine, and the right one.

3. Keep your seat when you speak.

Whether you are group member or leader, don't stand up to speak. The discussion meeting is not a place for speeches. Informality is the rule here.

4. Don't monopolize the discussion.

Don't speak for more than a minute or so at a time. Give others a chance. Dig for things that matter. Make your point in a few words, then pass the ball to someone across the circle. If discussion lags, help the leader put questions that will draw others out.

5. Don't let the discussion get away from you.

If you don't understand where it's going, say so. Ask for examples, cases, illustrations until you do understand. Try to tie up what is being said with your own experience and with what you have heard and read.

6. Indulge in friendly disagreement.

When you find that you're on the other side of the fence from the discussion, say so and tell why. But disagree in a friendly way. There's one truth that everyone's after. Good-humored discussion leads part way there.

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